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ABSTRACT

Traditionally, school personnel have expressed concern about the relatively poor record of involving Hispanic parents in schools. The root of the problem is that many immigrant and migrant Hispanic parents cherish beliefs and expectations different from those held by schools and by the parents whom schools most frequently engage. This chapter examines barriers to Hispanic parents' participation and strategies for cultivating more successful experiences with these parents. Barriers to the involvement of migrant and immigrant parents include: (1) logistical barriers (lack of time, financial pressures, migrants' fear of the community, lack of child care, and the segmented nature of public education); (2) attitudinal barriers (parents' uncertainties about their role in school, disagreements over school policy, parents' dissatisfaction with their own ability to help their children academically, and home-school communication problems); and (3) expectations barriers (school disregard of family's recent arrival, social or ethnic bias of school, and parents' perceptions of bias). Strategies that support the involvement of migrant and immigrant parents include flexible scheduling, providing transportation and child care, home visits, including extended family and community, parent workshops on expectations and roles, respect for parents, providing translators and bilingual school information, recognizing parents as contributors and collaborators, and basing programs on assessed needs. Overall, successful programs have stopped viewing parents as deficient, include parents as equal partners, and treat families with understanding and with high regard. Contains 29 references. (Author/SV)

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CHAPTER 20

Involving Hispanic Parents in Improving Educational Opportunities For Their Children

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Traditionally, school personnel have expressed concern about the relatively poor record in involving Hispanic parents in schools. The root of the problem is that Hispanic parents cherish beliefs and expectations different from those cherished by the schools and by the parents whom the schools most frequently engage. This chapter explores some of the basic misunderstandings, provides alternate ways of looking at the challenge of involving migrant and immigrant parents of Hispanic descent, and informs school personnel about strategies that have been used to cultivate much more successful experiences with these parents.

The Notion of Parental Involvement

Involving parents in their children's education and in educational decision making is a relatively new phenomenon in public schools in the United States. During early efforts to involve parents in education (in the early twentieth century), schools saw parents as agents of service for the school rather than as equal partners in the educational endeavor (Bermúdez, 1994). Schools identified the areas for assistance and how parents would be asked to assist.

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With the advent of the War on Poverty and other initiatives at the federal level came renewed emphasis on parental involvement. Ascher (1987) defines parental involvement as a range of activities from promoting the value of education in the home to the actual role of team decision maker in policy, curriculum, and instructional issues. According to Ascher, parents can participate at various levels, including taking advocacy roles, sitting on councils and committees, and participating in the decision-making process and operation of schools. Parents can serve as classroom aides, accompanying a class on a field trip or assisting teachers in a variety of other ways. Parent involvement may also take the form of teachers' notes to parents, or of parental support for fund-raising projects of the school. More recently, parent involvement includes learning activities at home through which parents try to improve their children's performance in school: for example, reading to them, helping them with homework, playing educational games, or discussing current events. Clearly, parent involvement is now seen as going beyond the bake sale and booster clubs.

Forces Which Hinder Involvement of Migrant/Immigrant Parents

In addition to the barriers imposed by beliefs and expectations just described, forces exist in the day-to-day exigencies of living that influence parental participation in both negative and positive ways.

Henderson, Marburger, and Ooms (1986) categorized barriers to successful parental involvement in two major categories: logistical and attitudinal. Villarreal and Barnwell (1990) added a third category of barriers: expectations.

Logistical Barriers

Logistical barriers include concerns about time, money, safety, and child care. *Time* for participating in school activities is a barrier since parents often work. When a family includes two parents, moreover, it is now common for both parents to hold jobs. In the case of migrant families, parents, siblings, and other relatives may be working quite a distance away from the school.

Money is the second logistical barrier. Recent migrant and immigrant families may experience intense financial pressures despite working long hours doing physically exhausting labor. Parents who work very hard to provide the bare essentials for their families find that their children's schooling reduces daily income, actually compounding the problem of the family's extreme poverty level (Chavkin, 1991). This understandable and reasonable concern adds another stressor associated with schooling.

Safety is a third logistical barrier. Migrant families have much to fear, and they are not always very welcome in the communities on whose behalf they labor. And some locations are ordinarily dangerous at night, when parent activities are usually staged.

Child care poses additional barriers. Making child care arrangements becomes more difficult for migrant families and recent immigrants when they no longer have an extended family to support them through free baby-sitting services. Being recent arrivals to a community, they usually lack close, trusting friendships; these can develop over time, however.

Finally, the *segmentation of programs* creates logistical barriers. The segmented nature of public education, where different programs target varying populations, makes it difficult to facilitate familywide learning programs (Orum & Navarrete, 1990). Families must, for instance, travel to one campus to enroll a child in pre-kindergarten, while the mother's English-as-a-second-language class is scheduled in another building, though health services are located in yet another part of town. Segmentation, combined with other barriers, can force migrant families into making bad decisions or just giving up.

Attitudinal Barriers

Attitudinal barriers cause migrant parents uncertainty about roles, anxiety about how they are being perceived, disagreements regarding educational policies, dissatisfaction with their own home involvement, and communication problems. Parents experience *uncertainty* about their role in U.S. public schools. Parents who have been educated in other countries view educators with high regard and defer to their professional expertise and experience where questions concern their own children's best interests (Nicolau & Ramos, 1990). Azmitia and colleagues (1994) found that, although parents held high aspirations for their children, parents had varying amounts of information about how to help their children realize such aspirations. While some parents were aware that school grades were important, *none* of the parents who hoped their children would become doctors, lawyers, and teachers were aware that these professions require a graduate education.

Disagreements over school policy will sometimes result in demonstrations or walkouts. When Hispanic parents perceive social injustices against Hispanic children or when Hispanic parents, as a whole, are being disrespected, they will probably organize social demonstrations against the school's leadership. If not handled well, disagreements can affect a school district's goals for sharing knowledge and decision making with parents in future issues.

Dissatisfaction over their own capability to carry out home involvement

activities (such as helping their children with homework, reading to them in English, and establishing routines) may prevent parents from undertaking such home teaching activities. Parents of secondary students want to help their children, but their inability to speak English usually prevents them even from trying (Simich-Dudgeon, 1986). Applying disciplinary actions related to cooperation with home learning activities also poses a problem. Azmitia and colleagues (1994) reported that 25 percent of parents indicated that they could not help directly with their older children's homework because of their limited schooling or English. Parents did help by checking to see that older children had completed the assigned homework or by enlisting the help of another older sibling. However, conflicts sometimes arose when adolescents, busy with their own homework, balked because of added work from helping younger siblings (Azmitia et al., 1994). The research of Casas, Furlong, Carranza, and Solberg (1986) showed that although both Mexican American and Anglo high school students sought help with their homework, help sources differed. Anglo students sought help from their mothers or fathers, whereas Mexican American youth, successful or not, sought help from their brothers and sisters, who were also struggling with their homework (Casas and colleagues [1994], cited in Minicucci & Olsen, 1993).

Communication problems result when parents sense that the school personnel are establishing a distance between them by using educational jargon in their communications. According to Nicolau and Ramos (1990), many low-income Hispanic parents view the school system as "a bureaucracy governed by educated non-Hispanics whom they have no right to question" (p. 13).

Expectations Barriers

Expectations barriers exist either (1) when parents feel themselves judged by their occupation or their economic status or that their language is not valued at public events or (2) when the schools actually do judge parents according to group membership, either by ethnicity or social class. Oftentimes schools expect a level of minimum participation of all parents, without regard for recency of arrival. Yet, recent arrivals to this country encounter many pressing demands on their attention, such as clearing up questions about immigration status (Commins, 1992); finding adequate, affordable housing in a safe neighborhood; seeking help for treating traumas (war, political violence undergone back home); or the shock of adapting to new lives in the United States (Carrasquillo & London, 1993; Violand-Sánchez, Sutton, & Ware, 1991).

While these barriers may seem daunting, not all of them are simultaneously present in any one site. Rather, school administrators must remem-

ber several points: (1) substantial barriers inhibit parental involvement, (2) schools must discover these barriers, and (3) school staff need to take concerted action to overcome them. In undertaking this action, moreover, schools must publicly acknowledge their responsibility *and* legitimate their concern for the life circumstances of migrant families.

Forces that Facilitate and Support the Involvement of Hispanic Migrant and Immigrant Parents

Flexible scheduling and checking for the best meeting times enhance parent participation. Some programs report conducting sessions during two time periods—for example, afternoon and mid-evening, 6:30-8:30 p.m. (Guzmán, 1990). The migrant program in Laredo, Texas, held a parent session in combination with a student attendance awards function on a Friday evening, and over 100 migrant parents attended. In attendance, too, were some of the children's grandparents and siblings. Although the time block selected by parents was inconvenient to the school, it was an excellent one for parents, who saw the event as an occasion for a social outing to celebrate the award (a bronze medal with ribbon) *after* the school functions. That is, the scheduling helped parents make sense of involvement in terms of their own circumstances. Success with Friday evening sessions were, similarly, reported by Delgado-Gaitán (1991). Casas and colleagues (cited in Minicucci & Olsen, 1993) visited immigrant parents at 10 o'clock at night because parents got off work around that time; they received him with coffee and *pan dulce* (dessert pastries).

Providing *transportation and child care* increases attendance at school functions (Bermúdez, 1994; Guzmán, 1990, Inger, 1993; Sosa, 1990). *Avance*, a nonprofit parenting agency working with Mexican Americans in the *barrio*, conducts home visits in public housing to recruit participants for their center (Cohen, 1994). They have a fleet of vans to pick up the mothers either for training in their own neighborhoods or for more advanced instruction (for the GED or college preparation) held in the downtown offices. Other outreach and logistic issues have been addressed through *home visits;* these not only personalize the invitation to attend school functions, but also assist school staff to understand parents' concerns. Successful outreach is *organized by people who have volunteered*, not by people assigned to do the job (Inger, 1992).

Ideally, the first meeting should be held outside the school, preferably at sites frequented by parents. Successful first meetings are primarily social events; business goals are reserved for subsequent meetings (Nicolau & Ramos, 1990; Procidano & Fisher, 1992). Barquet (1990) has suggested that parental involvement becomes more relevant to language-minority

populations when it is intergenerational and includes extended families and the communities to which the children belong.

Attitudinal barriers can be lowered by recognizing that migrant and immigrant parents—like all parents—value education. These parents, however, are unlikely to know what the educational system in the United States expects from them (Nicolau & Ramos, 1990; Sosa, 1993; Montecel, Gallagher, Montemayor, Villarreal, & Reyna, 1993). Part of a responsive program would include *sessions on expectations and roles of parents* as part of workshops for parents. Procidano and Fisher (1992) stress the need for demonstrating an understanding of both the importance of *respeto* and the individual's dignity. To convey these, the authors recommend employing formal titles for parents and a presentation of oneself with formal titles, as well as focusing on the individual and the family rather than bureaucratic procedures.

Attitudinal issues related to language use can be diminished when the following points are observed. Important school information should be sent in *both English and Spanish*. When holding parent-teacher nights or advisory meetings, parents should be able to listen through headsets to a translator speaking in Spanish. School personnel who can speak Spanish can also provide assistance. School personnel should participate in activities that provide greater visibility in the community—at festivals, celebrations, fund raisers, or shopping expeditions in the Hispanic community (Cooper & Gonzalez, 1993).

Successful parent involvement programs recognize that parents are not just passive recipients of services. They view parents as *contributors and collaborators*. Guzmán (1990) described some of the strategies used by the San Felipe Del Rio Independent School District's parent involvement program in a border community. Funding had been secured from the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Bilingual Education and Minority Languages Affairs (OBEMLA) in Washington, DC. She describes how only the first in-service topic (information about the fully-funded pre-kindergarten program and the need for parental involvement) was decided. At that first meeting, school officials asked parents to describe their needs and provide input. According to Guzmán, this action on the part of the school personnel signaled to parents that the meeting's intent was skills-building and served to help achieve ownership for the project goals, objectives, and activities.

Project OPTIMUM in Oakland, California, is another example of a successful parental training and involvement program. Personal and group interviews, observations from school visits, and direct inquiry from leaders of various ethnic communities provided the means to assess parental needs. On the basis of identified needs, one-day workshops were organized. A

cadre of parents became trainers of other parents. A large number of parents, thus, became facilitators within the school system, creating vocally positive community groups working as agents of change (Gonzales, 1986). This strategy is commended by Inger (1993), who notes that before joining any formal organization, Hispanic parents want to acquire the skills and confidence to contribute as equals.

In the Carpintería School District in California, two teachers, a special program director, and the migrant director developed the Committee for Latin Parents (COPLA). This parent committee began when a small parent group met and shared their need for training in ways to communicate with the school as well as strategies to help their children with homework. At their group meetings, parents learned how the school system works and about their rights and responsibilities as parents. Most important, this program's goal has been to link parents with one another for mutual support and for the mutual support of their children's encounters with the school (Delgado-Gaitán, 1991).

Similarly, Orum and Navarette (1990) indicated how children in the *Academia* program can be nominated to be in the program by either parents or teachers. In addition to paying a minimal (token) fee, parents are asked to contribute their own time. Parents sign a contract to attend at least 50 percent of the monthly parent activities; to read with the child at home for a specified amount of time (or for parents with limited English language skills, to have the child read to the parent); to establish and enforce rules for homework and school attendance; to review and sign the child's homework; and to ensure that the child has a library card. Extended families and other community members can make numerous contributions to the schools and should be used to enrich curriculum and school programs.

To retain the involvement of low-income Hispanic parents, school meetings must *respond to or address some need or concern* of the parents. In Houston, the FailSafe program of innovative approaches connects schools with families through two principal strategies: (1) organizing parent-teacher conferences in the secondary grades so that families can meet with several teachers on the same visit and (2) sponsoring programs that allow families to borrow school computers for the home use of both children *and* adults (Epstein, 1991). Rather than burdening parents with "shoulds" or with allegations of inability to help, this program *equips parents with the tools* they need to provide support and resources to their own children.

Literacy programs in the home language can provide meaningful, useful experiences to immigrant parents. When properly implemented, literacy programs can *tap parents' resources* and can ease the tension caused by role reversal when even young children translate for their parents. Ideally, the books selected should be meaningful and relevant to the lives of

children and their families. They must also validate and respect learners' identity, country of origin, and the experiences they bring to school (Lee & Patel, 1994). Parents-as-authors programs are able to accomplish this very well. Literature-based parent involvement programs include (1) programs that focus on teaching parents to use children's literature, (2) programs that interview and assist parents to write remembrances of their childhood to share with school children, and (3) programs where parents serve as teachers. Through children's literature, parents in Richmond, California, shared what they knew about farm animals, a choice that facilitated the participation of parents who did not read (Contreras-Polk & Díaz, 1995). The aim of the *Colorín Colorado*, a children's literature program, as described by Contreras-Polk and Díaz, is to help parents integrate what they already know with their current reality. For each story read, parents talked about parenting implications. After reading one story, they discussed the dangers of children's interactions with strangers.

Thus, successful programs addressed logistic concerns by providing transportation, child care, and flexible and workable meeting times. They assessed needs, ideally through home visits, and made their first contacts with the home a social event. These programs worked on building relationships and *being of service* to parents. Attitudinal barriers were overcome through hands-on training activities that resulted in parents acquiring new skills that they could see being put to use in subsequent interactions with the schools. Overall, these programs were successful because they stopped viewing parents as deficient and began to include them as equal partners. The change enhanced the joint power brought to bear for the benefit of children and youth by parents and schools.

A Paradigm Shift for Involving Hispanic Migrant and Immigrant Families

In the past, school programs have instituted support programs on the basis of the middle class norm or what "the literature" identifies as working in schools. Too often, however, programs have disregarded the varying circumstances of the families and children they actually serve. In the case of the Hispanic community, pressing factors such as poverty, mobility, cultural differences, and language constraints make the effort of recruiting and involving parents in their children's schools a very challenging task. Generalized solutions and one-best-systems are dramatically inappropriate.

Enterprising and interested school personnel have explored ways of minimizing constraints and maximizing strengths. The examples cited previously demonstrate that Hispanic parents will participate when school personnel seek their contribution, when every meeting responds to some

needs of the parents, and when programs consult with parents about agendas and meeting formats. Successful programs that reach out to parents' needs will eventually address issues that the school considers vital, whereas unsuccessful programs hold formal events at school and address parents in condescending ways (largely as a result of thoughtless habits).

Most important, successful programs recognize that treating all parents the same (in bureaucratically neutral ways) undercuts both success and equity. When school districts recognize that the Hispanic community is a diverse group with varying strengths and constraints, they can begin to plan diversified strategies for conducting outreach, recruiting volunteers, and ultimately determining how it is, specifically, that they will help parents support their children's education.

Adult education is a largely neglected strategy. Schools have persisted in training parents in reading, writing, and arithmetic to help their children with homework. But there is a connection between children's learning and adult education. That is, English-as-a-Second-Language classes, classes for the General Equivalency Diploma (GED), or Family Math Programs may have long-term benefits for the whole family. Of course, family literacy efforts should not preclude initiation of more short-term strategies that parents not yet literate in English can use at home—for example, having the children read to them, learning ways to handle discipline disputes regarding homework completion, and securing assistance from other sources.

Finally, school personnel must discard the all-too-prevalent assumptions that parents not traditionally involved in the schools have to be "remediated" and that the schools are the most authoritative source of knowledge. Successful programs have used other parents as resources, as sources of knowledge, and as trainers of other trainers.

Summary, Principles to Guide Practice

School personnel should regard migrant and immigrant families with *understanding and compassion*. They can begin the process of understanding the family and the relations of its members through carefully observing how roles are fulfilled cooperatively. This nonjudgmental stance toward the family is especially important because of the tremendous odds (including economic distress, prejudice, culture shock, language barriers, and institutional racism) confronting migrant and immigrant families.

The family should be shown and treated with *high regard* because all families, irrespective of their income, station in life, language, or cultural heritage, are *equally important* to the common good and to the arduous and challenging task of educating our youth. In particular, parents from previ-

ously unserved populations (especially poor, minority, limited-English-proficient, and migrant students) must be heard and heeded in the difficult effort to resolve dilemmas that are not yet widely understood.

The concept of family should be extended to *include other family members*, including grandparents, aunts, and siblings. Parental involvement activities should be intergenerational.

Programs should *make room for parents*. Not only should parents feel welcome, they should be visibly and responsively provided for. Parent rooms or space specifically allocated for parents need to be identified and made available for their use. Parents should be able to share and discuss ideas, get information and resources (including borrowing print materials and video- and audiotapes), and learn from each other about family problems and solutions.

Parent involvement should be *developmental and preventive*, an integral part of a school improvement or restructuring strategy, rather than a remedial intervention. Ideally, the form of parent involvement will positively affect not just the child, but will help the parent grow and develop as well.

School personnel need to keep in mind that parental involvement is not an end in itself; that is, it is not carried out in isolation. Rather, parental involvement must be *viewed as a support component*, supporting student academic achievement, in the same vein as curriculum, assessment, administration, and staff development.

School districts must allocate *the additional resources and staff* needed to accomplish the goals of parental involvement. Ideally, programs represent a collaborative effort wh[illegible] tasks are organized in a location convenient to families and where re[illegible]ources are shared.

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